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Boston Young Mens Christian Union

MISTAKES ABOUT ABSTAINERS

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CANON OF WESTMINSTER

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THE UNITARIAN TEMPERANCE SOCIETY

1894

Boston Young Men's Christian Union
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THE UNITARIAN TEMPERANCE SOCIETY.

Headquarters, 25 Beacon Street, Boston, Mass.

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EXTRACTS FROM BY-LAWS.

II. The purpose of this society shall be to work for temperance in whatever ways may seem to it wise and right.

IV. All persons paying the sum of one dollar annually into its treasury shall be members of the society, and be entitled to vote at its meetings. Twenty-five dollars, payable, if preferred, in five annual instalments, shall constitute one a life member.

FORM OF BEQUEST.

I give and bequeath to The Unitarian Temperance Society, of Boston, Mass., the sum of ..... dollars, for the use of said society.

MISTAKES ABOUT ABSTAINERS.

ALTHOUGH no accurate statistics are available, it may be said with certainty that in England, America, and our colonies there are millions of grown-up men and women who, from the conviction that such a course is wise in itself or helpful to others, have, as the ordinary rule of their lives, become total abstainers from all alcoholic drinks. In England a large number of the clergy have joined the Total Abstinence section of the Church of England Temperance Society; and it is believed that by far the majority of the Wesleyans and of the Dissenting ministers in general throughout the world are abstainers on principle. Now, it has become the almost universal fashion to speak of total abstinence as a fanatical fad, and of those who practise it as "intemperate Pharisees." . . . How often, for instance, have we been told that total abstainers are poor, weak, unbalanced creatures, who, being unable to protect themselves from drunkenness, try by all sorts of nonsense, folly, and tyranny to rob their neighbors of a harmless and beneficial indulgence! Into all these amenities I refuse to enter. If it is foolish and wrong to denounce all use of fermented liquors as a sin, it is no less foolish and wrong to speak of total abstinence from them as a Manichean condemnation of "a good creature of God." "A good creature of God"? I have heard Sir Wilfrid Lawson say: "Of course it is! So is a tiger. But one does not want a tiger in one's bedroom." No modest abstainer would claim his abstinence as a virtue, or Pharisaically pride himself upon it; but it is at least an equal absurdity to speak of the use of beer and wine as

though the self-gratification involved in drinking them were a virtue which entitles the "moderate drinker" to look down upon his neighbor from an indefinite altitude of superiority. And, surely, a sufficient number of men of pre-eminent goodness, learning, and wisdom, in all ages and countries,— from the days of Pythagoras down to those of John the Baptist, and through all the Christian ages,— have been more or less absolute abstainers, to prove that the practice can neither be injurious nor absurd. I will choose but two modern names out of hundreds which might be mentioned. John Howard, one of the sweetest and noblest of social reformers, was a total abstainer in the last century; and in our own days the Bishop who stood at the head of all his contemporaries for learning and wisdom — the late Bishop Lightfoot — was a total abstainer and an ardent supporter of the temperance cause. . . .

The question of abstinence or non-abstinence is one which can be settled only by the individual conscience and in connection with individual circumstances. There is no abstract right or wrong involved in it. The decision depends on grounds of personal judgment and personal expediency. What any total abstainer may do without offence is to state the reasons why, as the ordinary rule of his life and apart from special circumstances, he does not use fermented drinks. It is as preposterous to maintain that it is his *duty* to take alcohol as that it is his duty to take *pâté-de-foie-gras*. Many persons will not touch that condiment because they have been told that its production causes cruelty to geese. Many more think it best not to use fermented drinks because the very frequent abuse of them involves the intolerable ruin of tens of thousands of human beings, and because they think that the pleasurable sensations or supposed other benefits derived from the habitual use of alcohol are more than counterbalanced by the unutterable misery and degradation by which for many generations that general use has been accompanied.

1. To begin with perhaps the lowest argument: there

are myriads of households in which total abstinence would greatly increase the chances of family happiness on the ground of economy alone. If, as the experience of hosts of abstainers daily proves, all the best and brightest elements of human happiness can be attained in as high a degree as is possible on earth without touching alcoholic liquor, how much might be gained and saved in this way for higher ends! Even in multitudes of middle-class houses a self-denial, which to most persons would be very trivial, would in the course of years make all the difference between bright or squalid surroundings, between good or bad education for the children, between the pinch of debt and poverty or the laying by of something for a rainy day. Many a respectable household has been brought to poverty by its wine merchant's or brewer's bills. According to the *Statist*, even six glasses of wine daily (divided between a family of two or three persons) means £18 5*s*. a year, and six glasses of spirits means £24 6*s*. 8*d*. a year (about $120.00).

And, as for the poor, it is perfectly appalling to think that (as I know by experience) in lairs of the utmost squalor, where the parents are always begging and the children always starving, they manage to find money enough, somehow, to keep themselves constantly muddled with twopenny ale. Socialist orators denounce with fury the luxuries of the rich; but the luxuries of the rich, much as they are to be deprecated, are innocence and harmlessness itself compared with the criminal madness of self-indulgence which makes so many hundreds of thousands of the poor destroy themselves and plunge their wives and children into abject, irretrievable misery because they will not — will not, until at last they *cannot* — resist the tyranny of a brutal and self-created appetite. The stream of horrible profits which drunkards pour into the enormous reservoir of the drink trade is a stream swollen by untold misery to the innocent, and a stream which everywhere leaves the slime of its overflow over devastated areas of society. But, apart from drunkenness and all its ruinous incubus upon the well-being

of our country, the amount of hopeless *waste* caused by the drinking habits of our poorer population is the main cause of the pauperism and demoralization with which, for so many weary years, the best men have struggled in vain. If there were no other and deeper grounds for temperance efforts, they would be amply justified by the immense prosperity which the working classes might achieve for themselves if they would divert into the channels of useful trade the vast mass of wealth — amounting, according to some calculations, to £60,000,000 a year — which they spend on an article of consumption which is not a food, but a needless stimulant, and which, even in measures that are deemed moderate, is to large multitudes of men a source not of strength, but of weakness, not of health, but of wide-spread anguish and disease.

2. Apart from honorable economy, a man may wisely become a total abstainer if, from hereditary or other causes, he feels that alcohol might, under any circumstances, be to him a source of moral danger. With such examples as we have before us in history and literature, it is idle for any man to pretend to feel insulted by a suggestion of the possibility of his becoming a slave to drink. Neither education nor intellect necessarily places any man above the peril of excess. Who does not know the failing of Pitt and of many statesmen who were his contemporaries in what Sir George Trevelyan has described in his harrowing chapter as the "Age of Gout"? Who does not know the deplorable degeneracy of Bonnie Prince Charlie? Who has not read of the infirmity of Addison? Who has not mourned over the pathetic outcry of remorse and wretchedness uttered by Burns, by Charles Lamb, by Hartley Coleridge? One of the most eminent clergymen and men of genius of this age says, in one of his published letters, "I must be on my guard, for I find that *I am getting an ugly fondness for alcohol.*" What multitudes of men, ay, and of women — men and women of high principles and religious instincts — have yet been slowly swept into the vortex of excess under the

influences of misfortune, of solitude, of depression, or of old age!

"Let us all carry with us, deeply stamped upon our hearts and minds," said Mr. Gladstone at Liverpool in 1892, "a sense of shame for the great plague of drunkenness which goes through the land, sapping and undermining character, breaking up the peace of families, *choosing for its victims not the men or the women originally the worst*, but persons of strong social susceptibility and open in special respects to temptation. This great plague and curse, gentlemen, let us remember, is a national curse, calamity, and scandal."

3. Such motives for abstinence might be more than adequate, even if alcohol were, as a rule, beneficial to health. There are many who would cheerfully give up a lesser good to avoid the chance of a worse evil. But, if total abstainers are firmly convinced that alcohol, even in moderation, is *not* normally conducive to health, but, in its measure, injurious to it, they can at least appeal to many facts and many testimonies of the utmost weight. They are told on the highest chemical authority that alcoholic drinks contain only an infinitesimal amount of food. They can adduce strong arguments to show that abstinence from drink promotes longevity. Alcohol is proved by the most decisive evidence to be injurious in every way to children. It is so little necessary to support physical exertion that experiments like those of Sir H. Havelock in India and of Lord Brassey on the Great Northern Railway and of Dr. Parkes in the case of soldiers on the march and of Dr. Nansen among arctic explorers have proved (among multitudes of others) that alcohol is inimical to powers of endurance. At our great foundries, when special efforts are required, alcohol is at once knocked off. There are 32,000 prisoners in the three kingdoms, and, though the immense majority of them have been either inebriates or, at least, non-abstainers, no alcohol is given them during their sojourn in prison for years together; and yet prisoners form one of the healthiest and most long-lived bodies in the country, and constantly leave prison greatly improved in health and in appearance.

Nor can the very strong testimony of some of our most eminent surgeons and physicians be ignored, given as it has been on purely medical grounds, and as the results of wide observation. I will not quote the statements of men, however able, who are noted for their connection with the temperance cause, such as Sir Benjamin Richardson and Dr. Norman Kerr, but those of others who will be recognized as perfectly impartial authorities. "Alcohol," said Sir Andrew Clark, "is a poison; so is strychnine; so is opium; it ranks with all these agents." He said that for at least twenty-five years he had been physician to one of our greatest hospitals and had to inquire into the habits and health of about 10 000 people a year; and, as a result of his studies, he held that —

"Health is a state which cannot be benefited by alcohol in any degree. Nay, it is a state which, in nine times out of ten, is injured by alcohol; it can bear it sometimes without obvious injury, but be benefited by it never. Alcohol, even in small doses, will take the bloom off and injure the perfection and loveliness of health, both mental and moral. If there is any honest man who really wants to get at the truth, I would risk all I possess upon the back of the statement that, as certainly as he tries the experiment for a month or six weeks, so certainly will he come to the conclusion that, however pleasant alcohol is for the moment, it is not a helper of work."

"The effect of alcohol upon the nervous system," says Dr. Brunton, "may be described as one of progressive paralysis." "There is a great deal of injury done to health by the habitual use of wines . . . and alcohol in its various shapes," says Sir William Gull, "even in so-called moderate quantities. It leads to the degeneration of tissues; it spoils the health, and it spoils the intellect." I will quote but one other testimony out of many,— that of Sir Henry Thompson, in a letter to the Archbishop of Canterbury: "I have no hesitation in attributing a very large proportion of some of the most painful and dangerous maladies which come under my notice . . . to the ordinary and daily use of

fermented drink, taken in the quantity which is conventionally deemed moderate."

Are total abstainers so very imbecile if they attach some importance to evidence so emphatic from such competent recognized authorities, which might be almost indefinitely multiplied from other sources?

4. Not to exhaust the number of motives, I will mention but one more. The motive which leads men to become total abstainers is the hope and the desire of influencing others whose very salvation may depend on their being delivered from a terrible temptation. No one can estimate the force of this inducement so intensely as those of clergy who, like myself, are brought into almost daily contact with, or cognizance of, tragedies the most brutal, miseries the most unspeakable, the depths of Satan, the horrible degradation of womanhood, the death and anguish of children, the catastrophe and devastation of homes, the abnormal debasement of souls, the chronic and revolting squalor, the unspeakable, immeasurable, and apparently illimitable areas of human misery in its most unmitigated forms which have their source and origin in the temptations forced upon the poor by the shameless multiplication of gin-shops and public-houses. These "gins and traps of moral ruin," as Earl Cairns called them, are to myriads of those for whom Christ died what the flames of the guttering rushlight are to the wretched moths who flutter about them and through them and into them, until they are first singed and maimed, then shrivelled and scorched to death. Bad enough in many countries, this condition of things is worst of all in England, and in our dependencies and colonies,— especially among those savage races who stand to us in the relation of the helpless childhood of the race,— which in this respect we have injured by our commerce, our customs, and our example. That drink causes evils worse, because more continuous, than war, famine, and pestilence combined, is, as Mr. Gladstone told the House of Commons on March 5, 1880, "true for us, and is the measure of our degradation and dis-

grace." "We stand," we have been told, "by universal consent, almost, if not quite, at the head of all nations given over to the abuse of ardent liquor," which, since the introduction of gin in the seventeenth century, has been (as Mr. Lecky calls it) the "nameless curse" of English civilization. The great American orator exclaimed, "If I thought there was a stain on the remotest hem of the garment of my country, I would use my utmost labors to wipe it off." But the abuse of drink constitutes no mere *stain* on the garment of England: it clothes her in garments dyed with blood. Now, if all the most influential voices tell us that it is of supreme and primary importance to combat and suppress this vice,— if, according to the Archbishop of Canterbury, this is, "in one way, *the* work of this present day of Christ, for, unless it is done, very little else can be lastingly done"; if Lord Shaftesbury, with his unrivalled experience, was right in his conviction that "it is impossible, absolutely impossible, to do anything permanently or considerably to relieve poverty until we have got rid of the curse of drink"; if, as Lord Beaconsfield said, in the success of our efforts to control it, "is involved the triumph of the social virtues and the character of the great body of the people"; if, according to Lord Chief Justice Coleridge, we might, but for drink, shut up nine out of every ten gaols in England; if we could thus, in the opinion of men like Bright and Cobden, make England such a paradise as at present we hardly dream,— then total abstainers are hardly deserving of being held up to scorn and contempt for showing, by their personal example, how easy it would be for multitudes to find safety and happiness in the small and even pleasurable self-denial which they have adopted.

If the £135,000,000 per year, or more, which we annually spend on intoxicating drink, with results so infinitely disastrous alike to the nation and to individuals, were more wisely used and less ruinously wasted, not only would drunkenness and the most prolific causes of crime be nearly exterminated, but squalor and pauperism would become

hideous phantoms of the past; and most of the frightful evils by which we are now afflicted would cease to drag down our prosperity as with a hand of fire. I have not, in this paper, urged even a tithe of the arguments which weigh with us; but I trust that enough has been said to convince every fair and reasonable man that the example of total abstainers might be profitably followed by many who now despise it, and might tend to an immense amelioration of the happiness of the human race.

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